UNITED NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/ICEF/1992/NGO/11
19 June 1992

ENGLISH ONLY

UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1992 session

FOR INFORMATION

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The United Nations system and nutrition

1. The issues of hunger and malnutrition were addressed in the Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children of the 1990 World Summit for Children. The Summit Plan of Action calls for a commitment to eradicate hunger, malnutrition and famine and, thus, to relieve millions of children of tragic suffering in a world that has the means to feed all its citizens. Significant steps have been taken in many countries towards meeting that challenge, as testified to in the statements of the delegations to this Executive Board. However, shocking statistics still show that 1 billion individuals - 10 per cent of the population in developing countries - suffer from insufficient food intake; 15 per cent of all children under five years of age are underweight; and 20 million children suffer from severe malnutrition.

2. Helen Keller International, a non-governmental organization (NGO), has been active in the field of nutrition for over 20 years, working with Governments in developing countries and in collaboration with UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other national and international bodies to combat vitamin A deficiency, which is the greatest cause of childhood blindness and a significant factor in child survival. Based on its years of experience, our agency is now of the opinion that only a global approach can remedy the situation. The United Nations system is the major actor which can make a real contribution by taking a comprehensive approach to improving peoples' nutrition.

3. An example of where the United Nations system could exert such leadership is emergency food supplies now being pledged in response to the emergency situation in southern Africa. It is of the utmost importance that these relief supplies be fortified with vitamin A - a practice not always followed

in past emergencies. With what is now known about the positive impact of vitamin A on child survival, it would be irresponsible to deliver emergency food supplies that are not fortified with this vital micronutrient.

4. Recognizing that the subject of reform in the United Nations system is a matter of keen interest and concern to the UNICEF Executive Board, as expressed in the UNICEF note, "Ten Points for Reform in the United Nations System's Operational Activities" and in the opening statement of the Executive Director and comments from delegations, Helen Keller International would like to call attention to a lecture by E. J. R. Heyward, former Senior Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and a former Chairman of the Subcommittee on Nutrition of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, that they recently sponsored. The lecture, entitled "The United Nations System and Nutrition: The Need for Change in a More Democratic World", is summarized in paragraphs 5-16 below.

5. If the United Nations system is to make a real contribution to the improvement of peoples' lives, it must take a comprehensive and coherent approach to improving their nutrition. The United Nations system needs to change its advice and support to countries, and in so doing it needs to change itself.

6. The persistent world nutrition problem is morally, politically and economically unacceptable. One billion people do not get enough to eat. But the means are available to remedy this situation and the United Nations is capable of being a major actor.

7. Current economic and political developments pose a challenge to the United Nations system (which as used here includes the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)), as well as to national Governments, bilateral cooperation and the international community as a whole, to adapt their approach to global malnutrition. Populations are forcing their authoritarian Governments to become more democratic, powers of decision and administration are being decentralized to provincial and local levels, and communities are taking more responsibility.

8. These developments affect social and economic programming in general, but they apply particularly to nutritional improvement, which depends on changes of behaviour by households and communities. Consequently, the focus and content of nutrition interventions must change in many respects, in countries and in the supporting United Nations system and bilateral cooperation.

9. Within countries, nutrition can only be effectively and substantially improved through a comprehensive systemic approach involving all concerned sectors, all levels of government and community responsibility. Separate interventions by the sectoral ministries most concerned can make some improvements, although this may be more feasible in better-off than in low-income countries. But it is clear that in developing countries, while the sectors have an essential role, separate actions outside an overall framework cannot meet the need nor peoples' expectations for effective nutrition interventions.

A. Changing the United Nations system's response to the problem of nutrition

10. Changes are needed within the United Nations system in three areas:

(a) The focus and content of the United Nations system's support for nutrition interventions;

(b) The scale of the system's response to the nutrition problem;

(c) The organization of the United Nations system to foster and support national and local nutrition programmes.

B. Focus and content of United Nations nutrition interventions

11. Interventions to improve nutrition must focus on the three main causal areas: household food security; the malnutrition/disease complex; and household caring capacity. The types of possible interventions depend on the level of economic, financial and human development of the country.

12. Heightening the impact of interventions in these areas requires strengthening the following nine directions of agency work:

(a) Common framework. Each agency working in the area of nutrition in a developing country is working from a separate viewpoint and cooperating in a separate programme. The agencies and bilateral cooperation need a shared perspective on the causes of malnutrition, a theory about their interrelationships and a coherent approach for dealing with them. A consensus should be sought on a common framework for analysis and intervention, shared broadly with countries. It should turn the system's view of nutrition upside down, helping countries to programme interventions from the household and community levels up through the various levels of administration, as part of services in support of human development. This involves giving serious attention to the motivations that could make services work and to the obstacles in their way;

(b) Political context. In their cooperation with countries, agencies tend to neglect the political and cultural context and to emphasize only technical soundness. Without imposing eurocentric standards, the United Nations system can go further in analysing the structure of power and in advocating more democratization, decentralization, political accountability in the social sector, community empowerment and responsibility, equity, respect for human rights and a better allocation of resources to social sectors. The improvement of nutrition should become part of a wide range of policies, services and activities, including macroeconomic management, the advancement of women, conservation of the environment, civil administration, water supply and sanitation and housing, in addition to the "classical" involvement of agriculture and agricultural extension, health, education and welfare. (Among agency staff, there is a striking absence of qualifications in political science, sociology and area studies, including history.)

(c) Policy advice. The implicit assumption of the United Nations agencies has been that if the technical advice is sound, the service or programme will succeed; by now, this has been abundantly proved to be insufficient. The United Nations system should break out of its cocoon of technical advice, be prepared to take a more active stand on such relevant issues as macroeconomic management, budgetary allocations for the military and the social sectors (and the use of resources within these sectors), and equity, e.g., reaching the poor and reducing the gap between rich and poor. It should be better prepared to discuss operational strategies. Advocacy is needed for development and poverty reduction policies are necessary for long-term improvement in nutrition. The needed policies are in three fields: (i) economic growth that deliberately involves the participation of the poor; (ii) a safety net for the poor, including household food security; and (iii) the development of human resources. Countries need discussion about their overall approach to nutrition, not only their approach within individual sectors. Each agency needs to shape its advice and operations as a potential component of a comprehensive approach;

(d) Macroeconomic management. Nutrition programming has taken insufficient account of the fact that macroeconomic management is a key determinant of nutritional status, through its effect on the household income of low-income groups, employment, foreign exchange policy, food prices, the monetization of agriculture, privatization, the financing of public services and cost-recovery/user charges for social services. Nutritional considerations will not be a major factor in policy in such fields, but decision makers should be made aware of the implications and be prepared to deal with them if necessary;

(e) Civil administration. Ministries of the interior, local government or home affairs are too often not included among the ministries that should be involved in nutrition. The United Nations system should help countries to strengthen the capacity of district and local government and communities in the broad field of nutrition. Government officials need help to adopt the practice of dialogue with community organizations, helping them to analyse their needs and resources realistically and reaching a modus vivendi between government programmes and community priorities. The participation of countries' general administrators should be sought through the ministry of the interior or its equivalent;

(f) The private sector. Opportunities are being lost for mobilizing energies outside of government services, whether in private industry, religious organizations and other NGOs, or the large informal sector. Their cooperation should be sought. Certain precautions should be taken regarding privatization;

(g) Community base. The United Nations system has not taken into account the recent and potential growth of community responsibility. Usually communities will make a commitment to contribute to management, financing and monitoring and evaluation of services or interventions with which they are associated. Most important is that there should be a dialogue with

communities before any proposed intervention. Such a dialogue, in its fully developed form, will launch communities on an iterative process of problem assessment, analysis of causes and action decisions in the light of available resources. Government services should be helped to promote and support this process;

(h) Assessment of motivating and hindering forces. United Nations agencies do not routinely help countries to analyse the motivating and hindering forces that would affect proposed services or programmes, and strategies for them. To do so would improve prospects for extension and success;

(i) Advocacy and social communication. The United Nations system needs to give more attention to advocacy with opinion makers and decision makers, and to social communication to the population. In the international community, it should support a greater degree of world solidarity for the improvement of nutrition. If the opportunity presents itself, this should become support for a "movement".

C. Scale of the response to the nutrition problem

13. The scale of countries' nutrition-related activities needs to be greatly increased, not usually in the form of self-standing "nutrition programmes", but incorporated into poverty reduction, rural development, agriculture, health and education programmes and other available channels reaching into communities. This requires more external support from the United Nations system and bilateral sources of cooperation.

D. Organization for nutrition

14. The organization for addressing nutrition issues within the United Nations system can be improved in a number of respects:

(a) A consensus should be sought on a framework that would enable all concerned agencies to work in a sufficiently comprehensive and mutually supportive way;

(b) Guided by this framework, consideration should be given to designating a focal agency accountable for the United Nations system's contribution as a whole. It would not substitute for the concerned agencies, but would have responsibility for reconciling agency mandates, harmonizing policy and its application in countries and guiding the allocation of international resources. The Subcommittee on Nutrition of the Administrative Committee on Coordination would become an inter-agency advisory board to the focal agency;

(c) Nutrition staff should be strengthened in terms of their numbers, their professions and in training for programming and operations in developing

countries. At headquarters they would constitute a small unit that would be the "conscience" for nutrition in its agency (several agencies have no nutrition staff). More nutrition staff are needed in the system's regions. At country level, the needs should usually be met by trained national staff;

(d) Decentralization to country offices is needed, and several agencies need to undertake the painful process of deploying staff to the field;

(e) Budget procedures need to be made more rapid and more flexible in order to deliver the needed support to the local level;

(f) The United Nations system, working with developing countries, needs to put the external resource requirements of nutrition programmes more effectively before the international community - international, bilateral and NGOs.

E. Meeting the challenge ahead: improving peoples' nutrition

15. The United Nations is sometimes denigrated as a "talkshop". It is necessary to guard against rhetoric replacing action, and the above are proposed as practical steps to reduce the gap between the two. In the United Nations system today, efforts are being made in some of the directions recommended, notably within agencies and through their working together in the Subcommittee on Nutrition. I hope that these efforts will be further advanced by the International Conference on Nutrition later this year.

16. Of course, the United Nations system alone cannot solve the nutrition problem. Only a partnership between countries, bilateral cooperation and the United Nations system, including the development banks, could be effective. But the United Nations system has a comparative advantage for providing much needed leadership. It has the wide geographical scope and it could command the necessary range of technical resources. It is a world forum, representing industrialized and developing countries, with a growing involvement of NGOs.

17. In recent years, the United Nations has increasingly risen to the political challenge posed by the universal aspiration for self-respect, human rights and peace, for which it was created a half century ago. Its self-transformation in response to the challenge of improving peoples' nutrition - in terms of approach, scale of effort and internal coordination - would not only contribute to its overall effectiveness as an embodiment of that universal aspiration, but to the development as well of a new global compact on human development.